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THE PACIFIC IS CORE BUSINESS

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***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Australia does not place the importance upon the Pacific that it deserves. Our lack of leadership in the Pacific is one of the biggest gaps in Australia's national security policy.

It is not about a lack of presence. We have the largest diplomatic footprint of any nation in the Pacific and we provide the largest amount of development assistance. Our biggest defence cooperation programs are also in the Pacific.

It is about a lack intent which comes from a failure to understand how the Pacific sits within Australia's world view.

For too long the foreign and strategic policy community in Australia have seen the Pacific simply in terms of the 10 million people who live there, the vast majority of whom are in Papua New Guinea. In that context, it has a kind of importance associated with an historic obligation to the region but at the end of the day the Pacific is inevitably viewed as a niche area of policy interest.

This understanding of the Pacific could not be more wrong.

The Pacific is at the heart of our relationship to the world. Whether we understand it or not the Pacific is Australia's global calling card. For good or for ill we are rightly judged on our actions in the Pacific and correspondingly the Pacific's fortunes.

This has become very plain in the last few weeks during which the media in Australia has reported overtures being made by the Chinese to establish a military base in Vanuatu. Both Vanuatu and China have denied this. However, the very idea of it must be a wake up call for Australia.

If we feel there is something wrong with this picture – a possible strategic partnership between Vanuatu and China – the answer lies in our own behaviour.

China is spreading its wings and asserting itself within a region that includes the Pacific. It's been doing this for some time. We can complain but we are unlikely to change China's direction. In turn the nations of the Pacific will welcome any and all interest shown in them. We have no right to expect them to do otherwise. So when Senator Fierravanti-Wells in January sought to express Australia's displeasure at these burgeoning relationships with China unsurprisingly she was rebuked by Prime Minister Tuilaepa of Samoa.

In truth it is for Australia to earn its natural place as the partner of choice for these nations. The nations of the Pacific want to partner with us but not if we assume the partnership is by right. We need to demonstrate leadership which starts with making it clear that we care about the Pacific. This is where we are failing, but correspondingly rectifying our failure is how we change the picture.

As we grapple with this, one fact must become immediately clear. In this instance our relationship with Vanuatu is also about our relationship with China and in turn America.

Indeed it is in thinking about the way the Pacific plays into the American alliance that its importance is placed in the starkest relief.

Our relationship with the US is broad and comprehensive. Largely it is characterised by Australia playing our part in an effort being led by the United States. Given our relative size and standing in the world this is understandable. Yet there is one area in which America stands ready to do whatever we ask: the Pacific. The Pacific is the one opportunity in the context of the alliance where Australia is able to demonstrate how we lead, so it can provide a mutuality in our alliance relationship with America.

In this very real way the Pacific could play a role at the heart of the most important bilateral relationship Australia has. Yet as America effectively offers its strategic weight in the service of our leadership, in return we offer at best a holding pattern policy in the Pacific. We have not articulated a vision for the region, a strategy for ensuring its security or assisting in its development, and in the process the US looks at us with bemusement.

Ultimately the cry for Australian leadership comes most loudly from the Pacific itself. It is a region faced with huge challenges. Small populations in geographically isolated locations makes the task of establishing viable economies imposing. Government service delivery is equally as difficult. Development is proceeding very slowly and on current trends the Pacific will be the least developed part of the world by the late 2020s. On top of this are the effects of climate change, which for a number of these countries poses an existential threat within the lifetime of the current political leadership.

These nations look to Australia as a part of the region, with a comparatively massive and prosperous economy. We have a capable, stable, democratic government. As a G20 nation we have a global voice which can help tell their story. In combination with New Zealand we have so much to offer.

Moreover our presence in the Pacific means there are many Australians in the public and private sector who have an expertise in the region and know it well. There is more than enough Australian capability to develop a vision for the Pacific.

While aid is important, it is better access to our economy and a more imaginative way of cooperating on government service delivery, including defence, which will change development realities in the Pacific.

But formulating a vision of this kind will not happen until we decide that we need to do more than have a holding pattern policy in the Pacific, that we need to do more than simply fulfil an obligation.

We need to understand why the Pacific matters to us.

We need to understand that it is a way in which we build our relationship with the US and demonstrate to them that we can help share the burden of strategic thought in the Indo-Pacific. Doing this will help retain the American presence we need in the East Asian Time Zone.

We need to understand that our leadership in the Pacific is a demonstration that we mean to take our place in the world. It is at the heart of our being taken seriously not only by China but by all nations.

And so precisely because the Pacific is about our relationship with the US and with China, the Pacific should assume the importance in our world view that we give to the US and China. It must be front and centre.

It is when we finally have this realisation that it will become clear that leadership in the Pacific has to be core business for Australia.

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